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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001329

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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRESIDENT SLEIMAN ANNOUNCES SEPTEMBER 16  
START TO NATIONAL DIALOGUE

REF: BEIRUT 1223

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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11. (U) At a September 9 iftar he hosted at Baabda Palace, President Michel Sleiman announced that the National Dialogue would begin on September 16. Both the majority and opposition reacted positively in public to the announcement and confirmed their readiness to participate in the dialogue. However, disagreements on the agenda, and possible expansion of the participants compared to the National Dialogue of 2006, are likely to delay substantive discussion on the key issue of Hizballah's arms. End Summary and Comment.

MARCH 14'S REACTION  
TO DIALOGUE  
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12. (C) At an iftar he hosted at the Baabda Presidential Palace, President Michel Sleiman surprised his guests by announcing the September 16 launch date for the National Dialogue he will chair. Sleiman extended invitations to the 14 political leaders who participated in the May 2008 Doha conference. Many of them were present at the iftar, including majority leader Saad Hariri, Hizballah Minister Mohammad Fneish, and Patriarch Boutros Sfeir. By taking the audience by surprise, Sleiman sought to prevent disagreement over the number of participants from further delaying the start of the dialogue. (Note: The opposition had called for increasing the number of participants compared to the previous National Dialogue in 2006, reftel. Some of our pro-government contacts think the proposal will be revived. End Note.)

13. (C) Progressive Socialist Party (PSP)/Druze leader Walid Jumblatt described the invitation as "good," and said the Doha agreement is being implemented fully, but gradually. His PSP ally Minister of State Wael Abu Faour welcomed Sleiman's invitation and said in principle this is a positive step but that March 14 would have to wait and see the outcome before saying whether the dialogue will be a success.

14. (C) Former President Amine Gemayel (Kataeb) referred to the announcement as a "pleasant surprise" and added that the

Kataeb Party will definitely participate in the dialogue. He welcomed Sleiman's reference to UNSCR 1701 and said the GOL should implement it in its entirety. Gemayel also repeated his call for indirect negotiations with Israel that will tackle the issue of the right of return for Palestinian refugees. He said the UN could serve as an intermediary, as a German national envoy did between Hizballah and Israel during this the July 2008 prisoner exchange. Gemayel also referred to the 1949 Armistice between Lebanon and Israel as a source for solving the Sheba'a Farms issue.

15. (C) Another March 14 figure, Secretary General of the bloc Fares Souaid, told us that he welcomed Sleiman's initiative, but described the announcement as a positive sign from Syria towards Sleiman. Souaid added that Sleiman would not have dared to launch this call without a Syrian "blessing." He further noted that this could be a Syrian maneuver to gain time and to show the international community that Syria has good intentions towards Lebanon.

16. (U) According to moderate newspaper An-Nahar, Lebanese Forces leader (LF) Samir Geagea termed the announcement a big victory that will calm Lebanon's still tense situation. Geagea added that the participants should be able to reach agreement, on the issue of Hizballah's weapons. He also called on the National Dialogue Steering Committee (set up by President Sleiman and composed of Sleiman's Baabda Palace advisors) to develop an implementation mechanism for the clauses agreed upon previously during the 2006 National Dialogue, such as disarming groups outside of the refugee camps and diplomatic relations with Syria.

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17. (C) Geagea's Senior Advisor Elie Khoury warned that Mrch 14 would have to monitor Hizballah's reactions. Khoury hoped that Hizballah would not create new issues to place on the agenda.

MARCH 8-AOUN  
BLOC REACTION  
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18. (U) An-Nahar reported that Speaker Berri said he had no objections to including other topics on the National Dialogue agenda as long as all parties agree to the additions. In reference to Hizballah's weapons, Berri was quoted as saying, "The National Defense Strategy should include the issue of defending Lebanon at the military, security, economic, political, diplomatic and media levels." Hizballah MP Mohammad Raad told An-Nahar that Hizballah was ready to engage in the dialogue and is open to discussing all issues in order to ensure stability and national peace.

19. (C) Former MP Marwan Abu Fadel, an advisor to opposition Minister Talal Arsalan, told us he welcomed Sleiman's announcement and said the real issues will be debated after parliament passes a new electoral law. (Note: Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud told Ambassador today that although he expects the draft law will be submitted to parliament by September 25, it may not be passed until mid-October. End Note.) Abu Fadel added that the September 16 session will be designed mostly to transfer the reigns from Nabih Berri, who presided over the 2006 National Dialogue to President Sleiman. Sleiman might also call for an enlargement of the group to include figures like Marada Party leader Sleiman Franjiyeh (opposition), former PM Omar Karame (pro-opposition), former Parliament Speaker Hussein Husseini (independent Shia figure) and others, according to Abu Fadel. Abu Fadel added that Sleiman is ready for this move but that the opposition will have to wait and see the reaction of March 14.

10. (U) Minister of Telecommunication Gebran Bassil, an opposition leader, told Arabic daily As-Safir that his party, the Free Patriotic Movement of Michel Aoun, welcomes

President Sleiman's call and said the first session will be to discuss how the dialogue will proceed and what issues will be discussed. Bassil added that the electoral law needed to be passed before the dialogue can proceed.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Sleiman's announcement caught most by surprise, a tactic that seemed to be intended to cut off debate about expanding participation in the National Dialogue beyond that of 2006. If the response by the opposition is to push hard for expansion, we expect March 14 to object. The larger the invitee list, the less likely it is that any contentious issues, such as the future of Hizballah's weapons, will be resolved. Also, the suggestion by opposition figure Bassil that the discussion of real issues will be postponed until after a new electoral law is passed does not bode well, given the likelihood that the electoral law will not be approved until mid-October. While we are encouraged that Sleiman has set a date for the dialogue to begin, we also do not expect to see any significant progress anytime soon. End Comment.  
SISON